# Anti-“fake news” bill gives French state unchecked Internet censorship powers

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**8 June 2018**

On Thursday, the National Assembly began debating French President Emmanuel Macron’s draconian bill empowering the state to censor the Internet during the three months prior to any national election. The bill marks a vast new attack on freedom of speech, amid a wave of threats to Internet freedom worldwide based on the pretext of fighting “fake news.”

The bill would allow candidates and political parties to take articles and Internet statements to court, where judges could force Internet service providers to censor material by declaring that they believed it to be “fake news.” Due to the French president’s broad powers to name and control the promotion of top magistrates, the French judiciary is widely acknowledged to be dependent on the executive. The bill thus places enormous power over the Internet in the hands of the president.

The bill defines “fake news” not as information that is false, but as “any allegation or implying of a fact without providing verifiable information that makes it plausible.”

This anti-democratic definition poses vast dangers to legitimate journalism and political activity by removing any obligation on the state to prove that a statement is, in fact, false and harmful before taking legal action to suppress it. It lets judges order that legally protected speech be censored simply by asserting that they personally do not believe it to be convincing. It also allows judges to censor any article based on confidential sources such as whistleblowers on the grounds that the information contained in the article is not “verifiable.”

The bill grants the Superior Audiovisual Council (CSA) powers to censor and suspend television stations that are “controlled by a foreign state or under its influence.” This paves the way for the banning of media outlets such as the Russian state-backed RT and Sputnik.

While the bill purports to limit its reach to the three months before elections, a press campaign is underway to demand that no time limit be placed on these powers. When asked by “20 Minutes” whether he supported the bill, Sorbonne Professor François Jost replied: “The real question is why would this law go into effect only during election campaigns… Claiming that you can just tell any old lie at a certain time but not at another is absurd.”

In France, opposition parties across the spectrum of official politics have criticized Macron’s bill, aware not only that censorship is unpopular, but also that Macron could turn it against them. Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front called the bill “a danger to liberty” in a column for *Causeur*, while Stalinist deputy Elsa Faucillon warned that it “set up the idea of an official truth.” Right-wing parliamentarian Christian Jacob said Macron was establishing “thought police.”

The bill moves France toward a situation where the state can censor the Internet at will. The justification advanced by Macron and his supporters in an attempt to give the bill a quasi-democratic veneer is the claim that Macron suffered intolerable damage to his reputation when his electoral rival in last year’s presidential run-off, Le Pen, alleged in a TV debate that Macron had a hidden offshore bank account in the Bahamas. This is a cynical pretext and political lie.

Le Pen’s allegation did not do significant damage to Macron. Voters largely shrugged it off and Macron won the election by a large margin. Now, however, broad sections of the press are trying to whip up outrage at the fact that a neo-fascist made an unsourced accusation to justify an attack on the freedom of expression of the entire population.

France does not need to pass a new law to make publishing false and defamatory statements illegal. An 1881 law already provides for heavy fines for making such statements.

What is driving Macron’s moves to censor the Internet is not outrage at a few statements by Le Pen or RT, but fear of the growth of social anger and anti-war sentiment.

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Ruling circles want to dictate the political views to which masses of workers have access. This drive to remove oppositional information and opinions from social media and the Internet has taken its most virulent form in the collaboration of US tech firms such as Google and Facebook with the US government.

On April 25 of last year, Google publicly announced that it would implement an algorithm to exclude "fake news" from its search results and then blacklisted socialist and anti-war web sites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*. It refused to respond to press inquiries, including from the *New York Times*, as to whether it was deliberately targeting the WSWS, whose traffic coming from Google searches plummeted. However, later that year Google executives publicly boasted that they aimed to "improve" search results by blocking material from RT and Sputnik News.

At the beginning of 2018, Facebook announced that it would de-prioritize political news on its user feeds in favor of "personal moments." It said this would make Facebook "good for your well-being and for society."

French officials planning mass Internet censorship are no less terrified of public opinion. As Macron was preparing his censorship bill earlier this year, a press campaign erupted denouncing the French people for believing in "conspiracy theories." The so-called "conspiracy theory" that angered the press the most was the belief that NATO governments, including that of France, work with the Islamist networks that carried out terror attacks in Paris in 2015 and elsewhere in Europe since then.

That US and European intelligence agencies have poured billions of dollars into the arming of Islamist militias that serve as proxies in their war for regime-change in Syria is, however, not a paranoid "conspiracy theory" or "fake news" produced by "Kremlin trolls," but a widely-reported fact.

Official circles are concerned that broader and broader layers of the public are concluding that the "war on terror" and the French state of emergency imposed after the terror attacks are based on lies. Mass protests erupted in Barcelona last year shortly after the terror attack there, in which demonstrators denounced Madrid's complicity with the terrorists.

Macron's moves to censor the Internet are directly bound up with this growth of political opposition and a revival of class struggle. Mass strikes have broken out against Macron's austerity policies among rail, airline and energy workers, and dissatisfaction is growing among strikers over the efforts of the unions to isolate these different struggles to keep them from coming together in a common movement against Macron. Strikes are breaking out across Europe, from teachers and rail workers in Britain to airline workers in Spain and metal and autoworkers in Germany and Turkey.

The United States has seen a wave of teachers' strikes and protests organized by rank-and-file educators independently of and largely in opposition to the unions.

Fifty years after the May-June 1968 general strike brought French capitalism to the verge of collapse, the ruling class again lives in fear. Macron is well aware of the findings of the European Union's "Generation What" poll. It showed that after a decade of austerity, over 60 percent of youth in Europe are ready to participate in a "mass uprising" against the established order. Moreover, two thirds of the French population say the class struggle is a daily reality of life—20 percent more than on the eve of the 1968 general strike.

Under such conditions, imperialist policy makers and strategists increasingly view public opinion in military terms. One EU strategist wrote four years ago that since "the percentage of the population who [are] poor and frustrated will continue to be very high, the tensions between this world and the world of the rich [will] continue to increase, with corresponding consequences. Since we will hardly be able to overcome the origin of this problem… i.e., the functional defects of society, we will have to protect ourselves more strongly."

Macron's attempt to censor the Internet in the guise of fighting "fake news" is a key part of the desperate, anti-democratic maneuvers of the ruling elite as it seeks to save itself from the growing threat of social revolution.

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